

Notes & Queries

The Edinburgh Hawaiian Feathered Cloak and Museum Guessalogs

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Dear Editor,

I was surprised to read in the 2012 issue of *The Hawaiian Journal of History* an article that presented well-known information as new research. I refer to J. Susan Corley's article in the Notes & Queries section of Volume 46.¹ It seems especially odd, as the same information about the cloak was presented in an earlier issue of *The Hawaiian Journal of History* in 1978, where it is noted,²

At least two cloaks now in museums in Britain can be traced to the visit of Liholiho to England. One was given to the Honorable Frederick Byng of the Foreign Office who was assigned to the Hawaiian royal party. Byng gave the cloak to his brother-in-law, the Reverend Colin Campbell, who, in turn, gave it to the Saffron Walden Museum in 1838. The Saffron Walden Museum sold it to the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh in 1948, where it now remains. The Saffron Walden Museum records that it was worn by Liholiho's "favorite medicine man."

In a more recent publication the following information is added:³

According to a letter in Saffron Walden, Byng had been appointed by Mr. Canning, [George Canning, Foreign Secretary to George IV], as

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chief attendant to their Sandwich Island Majesties. The cloak was said to have been worn by Liholiho's "favorite medicine man," who was also called the "treasurer." He alone "was dressed in the full costume of his country;" and on another occasion wore "over his ordinary coat a scarlet and yellow feather cloak and a helmet covered with the same material, on his head."⁴ He was called "Joanoa," which probably refers to Kekuanoa, a chiefly member of the retinue. The design is a combination of red crescents and horizontal diamonds delineated by yellow feathers, which also form crescents. The cloak was admired by Queen Emma in 1865 and it was loaned to her for an exhibition in Paris.⁵

Even more surprising is Corley's implication that the cloak had not been on exhibit before the recent exhibition to which she refers,⁶

In 2009, however, NBS' catalog did not reference the cloak; neither did NMS' archives possess its photograph. Thus, it appears that Liholiho's



FIGURE 1. Exhibit of Hawaiian feathered cloak at the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, 1970s. Photograph in the Bishop Museum "Ethnographic Photo Files." Photographer unknown. Courtesy Bishop Museum, .

gift to Byng had languished in NMS' vaults—well cared for but out of public view—until Ms. Chantal Knowles, NMS' Principal Curator Oceania, Americas and Africa, became involved in the creation of the Pacific Islanders' gallery, "Facing the Sea."

This is surprising because I saw the cloak on exhibit several times during my research visits to the museum starting in the 1970s. I include here an undated photograph of the cloak on exhibit in Edinburgh (Figure 1) and I have a photocopy of a catalog card for the cloak. Indeed, all of the information about the cloak is included in the Bishop Museum's "Ethnographic Photo File," much of which was compiled by Brigham, Emory, Kaeppler, and others. It is also illustrated in Brigham.⁷

For those readers interested in this cloak and the 55 other Hawaiian feathered cloaks (as well as other Hawaiian featherwork), please consult my 2010 book on the subject⁸ where all known Hawaiian feathered gods, cloaks, helmets, and capes are published in color. The book is in Bishop Museum Library, Honolulu Museum of Art Library, the Hawaiian collection of Hamilton Library at the University of Hawai'i, and elsewhere.

A WORD OF CAUTION ABOUT MUSEUM GUESSALOGS

Perhaps a word of caution is appropriate here to historians and others about museum records and catalogs. Much, or even most, information about objects in museums is not recorded in the archives and documents in which an object is held. Simply asking a curator what is in their registers is not doing historical research, and the curators should not be blamed for not knowing the history of every object in their collection, especially if it is known that the records are faulty as in Edinburgh. The curators of some museums have done a time-consuming excellent job of adding published information to their catalogs. For example, the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, and the British Museum, London, have amazing databases for a large number of their objects. In addition to setting the record straight, my point of this short note is that Ms. Corley should have researched the published record of the cloak or at least gone across Honolulu to Bishop Museum to ask the specialists there.

NOTES

- ¹ J. Susan Corley, "National Museums Scotland Displays One of Kamehameha II's Featherwork 'Ahu'ula Cloaks," in *Notes & Queries*, *HJH*, 46 (2012): 139–143.
- ² Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "L'Aigle and HMS *Blonde*: The Use of History in the Study of Ethnography," *HJH*, 12 (1978): 28–44.
- ³ Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *Sanctity and Danger: Divine and Chiefly Featherwork of Old Hawai'i*, volume one of a three volume work, *Intolerance*. Berlin: Nationalgalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, (2010) 40.
- ⁴ Alfred Frankenstein, "The Royal Visitors." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 44 (1963): 10, 22.
- ⁵ This publication (Kaeppler 2010) examines all six cloaks that can be traced to the visit of Kamehameha to England in 1824 (as well as the cloak given away in Brazil before the royal party reached England.)
- ⁶ Corley, 142.
- ⁷ William T. Brigham, *Hawaiian Feather Work*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press. (1899) 74.
- ⁸ Kaeppler 2010.